A taste of the "Spicy Subcontinent": Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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Sex sells, and so does exotica. As the advertising industry has extensively demonstrated, sex gets consumers' attention, so what better promotion for a film, one may think, than displaying in the teaser poster a scantily clad couple lying down on a sea of red chillies? This seems to be the promotion strategy behind the poster for the film *The Mistress of Spices*, directed by Paul Mayeda Berges in 2005 and adapted from the novel by the same title written by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The couple on display here is made up of the Hollywood hunk Dylan McDermott and the Bollywood stunner and former Miss World Aishwarya Rai, the latter the most visible leader of the so-called Bollywood invasion as she has been making inroads into Hollywood.[1] Should the dazzling couple and the supply of red chillies in the teaser poster prove not to be spicy, that is, exotic and erotic enough, the prospective consumers are expected to notice on Rai's upper body an extra trace of the exotic: the henna painting (*mehndi*), a temporary skin decoration most often applied on the palms and feet (not on the shoulders), traditionally worn by brides before wedding ceremonies, and whose status as cultural marker resulted in its incorporation, along with the bindi, into western fashion in the late 1990s.

The association between food and sex is certainly a recurring motif in literature and cinema — one needs only to recall the novel and film *Like Water for Chocolate* written by Mexican novelist Laura Esquivel in 1989 and adapted to the screen by Alfonso Arau in 1993. Exotica is a complementary hook to draw western audiences in, and cookbook authors such as the Indian-born Padma Lakshmi (or their editors) have not failed to draw on that. In 1999 Lakshmi — a former model, Salman Rushdie's fourth ex-wife, currently involved in acting and hosting the American reality television program *Top Chef*, in which the contestants are culinary chefs — published the cookbook *Easy Exotic: Low-Fat Recipes From Around the World* which displays photographs of Lakshmi preparing food, such as of her kneading dough dressed in a lacy nighty, in a silk slip cooking

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[1] Interestingly, Rai's first feature film in English was Gurinder Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), whose tagline read "Bollywood meets Hollywood... And it's a perfect match." Besides *The Mistress of Spices*, recent Hollywood projects include *The Last Legion* (dir. Doug Lefler, 2007) and *The Pink Panther 2* (dir. Harald Zwart, 2009).

a recipe, and going to the market in a low-cut dress. Besides bearing out Arjun Appadurai's assertion that cookbooks "tell unusual cultural tales," and that they feed on "the vicarious pleasures of the literature of the senses" (3), *Easy Exotic* conflates food with eroticism and peppers it with expectations of consumption of the exotic. In this sense, Lakshmi's cookbook reflects an ongoing cultural shift in "the vagaries of the market" (3). Moreover, the photographs by Priscilla Benedetti included in *Easy Exotic* literally illustrate Frank Chin's original concept of "food pornography" (1981), which, as delineated by Sau-ling Cynthia Wong in her 1993 study of Asian American literature, refers to the process of "making a living by exploiting the 'exotic' aspects of one's ethnic foodways" (55).[2] In a way that resonates in Divakaruni's novel, Wong adds that food pornography "translates to reifying perceived cultural differences and exaggerating one's otherness in order to gain a foothold in a white-dominated social system" (55), and that as a consequence food pornographers "wrench cultural practices out of their context and display them for gain to the curious gaze of 'outsiders'" (56).

Conceivably, it was Lakshmi's successful performance as food pornographer that earned her the title of "Mistress of Spice" given by *Cosmopolitan* magazine on its January 2002 issue, three years before she was cast as the character Geeta, the young woman who wants to marry a chicano against the wishes of her family, in the almost eponymous film by Paul Mayeda Berges. If the idea of food pornography clearly resonates in Divakaruni's narrative, given its cultural self-commodification and self-exoticisation though culinary imagery, the same is true of its cinematic adaptation. The film's photography, directed by the Indian cinematographer Santosh Sivan, consistently takes the appearance of a tantalising food-magazine layout, with the central setting in both novel and film — the Indian spice shop — constructed and presented as a magical and alluring territory. The ruler and ever present figure of this space is Tilo, a woman in possession of supernatural talents and trained in the art of healing with spices. Divakaruni, an Indian immigrant to the United States herself, elects as the narrative engine for the novel the arrival of this spice-Mistress in America. Tilo has had different provisional homes before travelling to the US: a small village in India while growing up, the sea as pirate queen, and the fantastic world of "the island of spice" as Mistress of Spices. Her diasporic journey does not end in Oakland, California, and this location is to remain her home only momentarily, insofar as her duty is to act as spice-Mistress.

Upon coming to her newest home, Tilo becomes the "architect of the immigrant dream," she "who can make it all happen, green cards and promotions

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[2] Wong credits the Chinese American author with the first use of the concept in the plays *The Chickencoop Chinaman and the Year of the Dragon* (1981).

and girls with lotus eyes" (Divakaruni 28), she who has in her hands the ability to curb other difficulties that immigrants might experience: "I will split once again tonight *kalo jire* seeds for all who have suffered from America" (173). Her special powers allow her to help diasporic Indians that enter her shop, while the remaining others "must go elsewhere for their need" (68). Some of the characters in necessity are Haroun, a Kashmiri Muslim taxi driver who is beaten in a racially-motivated incident; Ramu, Geeta's grandfather, an elderly Gujarati immigrant, who performs the role of the stock character trapped between (eastern) tradition and (western) modernity; and Jagjit, an alienated Punjabi teenager who is bullied at school and so decides to join a gang (145). For instance, to ease Jagjit's troubles, the spice-Mistress administers cardamom, "to open [his] teacher's unseeing," and "[c]innamon friend-maker, cinnamon *dalchini* warm-brown as skin, to find [him] someone who will take [him] by the hand, who will run with [him] and laugh with [him] and say See this is America, it's not so bad" (39-40) The underlying premise here is that the problems these characters face — "their "suffe[ring] from America" —, can be solved by the "spiritual" power of the spices Tilo willingly prepares and dispenses. Consuming fennel or turmeric in the prescribed doses, so the story goes, can shield Indian immigrants from racist verbal and physical assaults. In this respect, Divakaruni capitalises on the commodity value of Eastern mysticism; indeed, her deployment of the healing energy of her protagonist's Indian spices is consistent with what Vijay Prashad labels "New Age orientalism" (53-54), that is, the quest for the spirituality of the Indian subcontinent as a remedy for the alienation induced by (western) materialism. Interestingly, Tilo's characterisation is evocative of Deepak Chopra (Mannur 60), the celebrity Indian medical doctor and guru who, according to Prashad, is the hip precursor of New Age orientalism (53).

In the novel, spices are deemed to "hold magic, even the American spices you toss unthinking into your cooking pot"; yet, "the spices of true power are from [the Mistress's] birthland, land of ardent poetry, aquamarine feathers. Sunset skies brilliant as blood" (3). Divakaruni's magical realist text steps into the territory of an increasingly commodified and formulaic postcolonial culinary fiction that the Sri-Lanka born writer Michelle de Kretser aptly described in *The Hamilton Case* (2004):

> An ash-smeared sadhu. The fragrance of cumin. I pulled them from my hat in earnest good faith when I first ventured into fiction. And my stories proved very popular with readers in the West. They wrote to tell me so. *Your work is so exotic. So marvellously authentic*. When the flatulent rumbles of self-satisfaction subsided, I saw that what I had taken for the markers of truth functioned as the signs of exoticism. The coloniser returns as a tourist, you see. And he is mad for difference. That is the luxury commodity we now supply, as we once kept him in cinnamon and

> sapphires. The prose may be as insipid as rice cooked without salt. No matter: call up a monsoon or the rustle of a sari, and watch him salivate. Literature as souvenir: I confess I traded in it. Tales as undisturbing as the incense peddled in every mall here in Vancouver; each trite sentence a small act of cynicism. (294)

Seemingly, even long after the period of India's so-called "discovery," the country remains "not so much sub-continent as sub-condiment," as the character Aurora da Gama puts it in Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* (4-5). Aurora, who traces her lineage back to Vasco da Gama, construes the spice trade thus: "From the beginning, what the world wanted from bloody mother India was daylight-clear (…). They came for the hot stuff, just like any man calling on a tart" (5).[3] Numerous Indian authors based in the West have somewhat surrendered to an identical and characteristic food imagery and, in this sense, the deployment of a recognisable food trope in the novel illustrates the "predominance of the effect" that Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno identify as one of the features of the culture industry: "The development of the culture industry has led to the predominance of the effect, the obvious touch, and the technical detail over the work itself — which one expressed an idea, but was liquidated together with the idea" (125). Postcolonial culinary fiction bears at times a striking resemblance to the workings of "art for the masses": "There is nothing left for the consumer to classify," the German critics contend, as "[p]roducers have done it for him" (125).

Consumer items need to be recognisable in order to guarantee commercial success, and being categorised as postcolonial culinary fiction serves a merchandizing apparatus. As the journalist and novelist Anis Shivani trenchantly remarks about what might be construed as a form of ethnic self-exploitation, "[s]ince western audiences are best acquainted with Indian food, a typical Indo-Anglian novel will deal obsessively with exotic, spicy food, as if Indians spent the greater part of their lives pondering the taste and timing of their food intake" (2). By the same token that the novel which established the food trope used so recurrently by diasporic Indian authors — Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) — displays chutney jars on one of its most recent covers, *The Mistress of Spices* was sold with a packet of spices when it was first released. This promotional campaign, one suspects, was devised to cash in, as Rushdie's cover design does, on the exotic lure of a postcolonial culinary fiction (Mannur 59). And if Divakaruni's bestseller was initially promoted by using a packet of spices, the cookbook *Spice: Recipes to Delight the Senses* (2007) used the opening

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[3] As an aside, it is noteworthy that red chillies, popular across India and the spices chosen to feature on the poster for the film *The Mistress of Spices*, were introduced by the Portuguese.

paragraphs of *The Mistress of Spices* as the epigraph for one of its introductory texts, aptly titled "The Sensuous World of Spices" (9).

In a related inquiry into postcolonial culinary fiction as exotic commodity, but drawing primarily on Southeast Asian diasporic fiction, Tamara Wagner argues that a recent trend in literature set in Malaysia, Singapore and Australia has begun to self-reflexively comment on its own standing as a trademarked consumer item — one of several that fuels the "otherness machine" (Suleri 105) —, by articulating consumption and nausea as outcomes of the same process (Wagner 31). If food metaphors "help to promote the marketability of the multicultural," Wagner asserts, "their renegotiation in more self-reflective [and self-ironic] writing has recently begun to engender new food fictions that capitalize on repulsion as a form of resistance to this demand for self-Orientalization" (31). Seemingly, Divakaruni complies with such expectations for self-Orientalization, even though in the context of her culinary fiction Lisa Lau's concept of "re-Orientalization" seems more effective to describe the exoticising processes in *The Mistress of Spices*. Lau focuses on what she discerns to be the disturbing effects of the ever-increasing role of diasporic Indian women writers in fabricating overseas a reductive, fixed and distorted idea of the subcontinent. Such authors — Divakaruni is included in the group — are turning (indeed re-turning) the Orientalist gaze back upon the "Oriental"/"Orient". As Lau compellingly argues, they have become re-Orientalists on account of their positionality as "simultaneously that of the insider and outsider" (2).

If Orientalism broadly refers to western misconceptions of the East, it might be feasible to extend Lau's theorisation and read Divakaruni's novel as engaging in culinary re-Orientalism. Probably it might not be fair to state that the author had the calculated and conscious aim of profiting from the use of spices as the structuring motif of her novel. Perhaps the writer was not moved by what Vasco da Gama was pursuing, again according to Rushdie's narrator in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, i.e., "whatever was spicy and hot and made money" (59). Maybe it is too radical to assess *The Mistress of Spices* as the outcome of, as Leela Gandhi puts it, "an unwholesome partnership between neo-Orientalism and postcolonial opportunism" (128). Even granted that Divakaruni might not have chosen the theme of spices exclusively as a marketing manoeuvre to play the global market and increase the sales of her debut novel, it is still possible to detect a degree of authorial intent in re-Orientalist codification. In *The Mistress of Spices*, writes Amitava Kumar, "Indians are postcolonial chickens coming home to roost — as spicy, well-barbecued Tandoori," a fact that makes it plain, in Kumar's words, "that the literary goods in question have been stamped, 'For Export Only'" being as they are nothing but "easy-to-swallow nonsense" (88).

In this respect, a connection can be established between Divakaruni's novel

and Shoba Narayan's *Monsoon Diary: A Memoir With Recipes* (2003), a work that weaves South Indian vegetarian recipes with a personal narrative about the author's childhood and later "juggling of cultures, straddling lifestyles" in the US (102), and which might equally qualify as food pornography. This much is suggested by the book description included in the inside flap suggesting that Narayan's stories are "as varied as Indian spices — at times pungent, mellow, piquant, and sweet" and that "[t]antalizing recipes" spring from her "absorbing tales about food and the *solemn* and *quirky* customs that surround it" (emphasis added). In a review of Narayan's work reprinted in the hardcover edition, Sharon Boorstin describes it as "[a] taste of a life that is exotic yet familiar" and "as pungent and satisfying as a good curry." Reading *Monsoon Diary*, Boorstin concludes, made her "want to get on a plane to India — or at least eat in an Indian restaurant." The choice of the title word "monsoon," to a great extent inconsequential in narrative terms, functions as a hook for the global market. In fact, the use of the title of Mira Nair's hit film *Monsoon Wedding* (2001) for one of the chapter headings of Narayan's memoir seems to confirm this intention of capitalising on the exotic appeal of the term "monsoon."

Similarly to the comparison Divakaruni's narrator makes between India and the US, unfavourable to the latter, in the opening pages of her memoir Narayan draws a stark contrast between American fast food and Indian food while stressing the ritualistic nature of feeding Indian children:

> Indian mothers are obsessed with feeding their children, and perhaps as a result Indian kids don't eat well. When I attend parties with American families, mealtimes seem so civilized and quiet. The mothers cut up a piece of meat or a pizza into small pieces, and the kids obligingly fork it in. Compare that with an Indian party. Mothers follow their kids around, hands outstretched with food, entreating them to eat. Fathers balance plates of food in one hand and, with the other, try to grasp crawling babies intent on escaping. (3-4)

An emphasis on the idea of "authentic" — and hence dismissal of the hybrid — is resumed later when, after a failed attempt to turn her husband Ram into a fusion cuisine lover, Narayan goes back to preparing "simple" South Indian food because he "was tired of entertaining the United Nations in [their] kitchen" (191).[4] Likewise, *The Mistress of Spices* reinstates the stereotypical notion of

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[4] Arjun Appadurai notes that "Indian" cuisine is a construction resulting from a postindustrial and postcolonial process: it "emerged because of, rather than despite, the increasing articulation of regional and ethnic cuisines. As in other modalities of identity and ideology in emergent nations, cosmopolitan and parochial expressions enrich and sharpen each other by dialectical interaction. Especially in culinary matters, the melting pot is a myth" (22).

Indians as consuming subjects of spicy food evocative of their "homeland," needing to continually feed a nostalgic longing. Indeed, Tilo associates the ingesting of particular Indian foods with being Indian, as if there were any clear cut correlations between ethnicity and food. To Divakaruni's essentialist narrator, what you eat is who you are. This much is evident, albeit by contrast, in the depiction of the "rich Indians" who are clearly set apart from the rest of Tilo's customers. These wealthy Indians relate themselves almost wholly to white-upper class Americans to the degree of actually *passing* as white. Some of them "have forgotten to be Indian and eat caviar only" (76), she comments despondently. In this near-totalising remark, Tilo perceives those who have ceased to eat Indian food, and started instead to favour "western" delicacies, as Indians who have disregarded who they are. Divakaruni employs thus a pornographic (in Chin and Wong's sense) culinary framework given that, ultimately, she partakes of an ongoing pattern of re-Orientalisation through which Indians are categorised and othered by what they eat.

As a concluding remark, it seems that the exotic cachet of India, which certainly contributed to *The Mistress of Spices* being adapted to cinema, has yet to subside, if one judges from the trend-setting list "Haute List: Yay Bombay" published in *the New York Post* in April 2008:

> FOR spring/summer 2008, the Subcontinent and its neighbors might be the hautest place on Earth. (…) O.P.I.'s spring/summer collection (…) — "India" — come in colors like "Royal Rajah Ruby," "Curry Up, Don't Be Late" and "I'm Indi-A Mood for Love" (…). At the Hermes store (…), catch "The Home and the World," a collection of photographs from Indian photographers Raghubir Singh and Dayanita Singh. (…) *It's cheaper than a flight to Mumbai* — just. (emphasis added)

Besides the blatant commodification of India — and notwithstanding the Orientalist references to rajahs and curry used as inspiration for glamorous nail polish colours,[5] where different shades function as a metonym for consumable exotica —, the underlying message reads that it is possible for the westerner to travel to India via the photographs of Raghubir Singh and Dayanita Singh. In a somewhat identical way, magical realism is turned by Divakaruni into an exotic

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[5] Other names in the colour catalogue for the India O.P.I. collection make up the rest of the exotic entourage which includes elephants, chutney, karma, monsoons, yoga, the Taj Mahal, and snake charming: "ElePhantastic Pink," "Black Cherry Chutney," "Keys to My Karma," "MonSooner or Later," "Yoga-ta Get this Blue!," "Get Me to the Taj on Time," "Charmed by a Snake," etc. (<http://www.opi.com/India.asp>). The authors of the *New York Post* India-related product selection misspelt one of the names — instead of "I'm Indi-A Mood for Love" it is in fact "I'm India Mood for Love."

device: it is feasible for the metropolitan reader-consumer to take a tour of the subcontinent without leaving the comfort of his/her home through the aid of a magic realist text sprinkled with Indian spices. On the one hand, the "Haute List" of the *New York Post* and postcolonial culinary fiction such as *The Mistress of Spices*, and on the other hand, travel writing to the degree that both seem to be performing the purpose of "*producing* the 'rest of the world'" for a metropolitan audience (Pratt 5).

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